



Translations of the Qur'ān into Western Languages

Ziad Elmarsafy*
University of York

Abstract

This article traces the history of the translation of the Qur'ān into Western languages from the Middle Ages to the present day. The focus is primarily on translations into English and French. The author considers the problem of the translation of the Qur'ān in light of the development of Oriental studies in the West as well as the political frameworks that inform the processes of access to and interpretation of the text.

If ever politics drove scholarship, it was in the Western translation of the Qur'ān. Just as translations of the Qur'ān flew off the shelves in the wake of the devastating attacks of September 11, the earliest attempts at a complete translation from the Arabic text were prompted, in part, by the many clashes between Muslims and non-Muslims over the centuries and the theological polemics that went with those encounters. Not coincidentally, the conception of one such project occurred at a key geographic and cultural interface between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds; namely, the Iberian peninsula. Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, decided that fighting Islam by force of arms was insufficient and ineffective. After a visit to Spain, he coordinated a group of scholars whose task was to translate the Qur'ān. The Toledan Collection (alias the Cluniac Corpus, 1142–1143) contained a number of texts aimed at providing the reader with a context within which the Qur'ān was framed: a history of the Arabs and biography of the prophet, both based on Arabic sources, along with didactic dialogues and summaries of Islamic doctrine. All of these texts served an auxiliary function to Robert of Ketton's 'translation' – not a faithful translation, in fact, but a paraphrase that incorporated the text of several exegetes into the body of the text – of the Qur'ān under the title *Lex Saracenorum seu Alchoran* (*The Law of the Saracens, or the Alchoran*). Despite the liberties that Robert of Ketton took with the text, it was a lasting success, serving as the basis for numerous future Western translations of the Qur'ān. Despite Mark of Toledo's more accurate thirteenth-century translation, the Cluniac corpus's user-friendliness, aided and abetted by the Cluniac network, ensured its wide distribution.

Robert of Ketton's approach – calling the Qur'ān the 'Law of the Saracens' rather than 'the liturgy' or 'the Book' of the Muslims, as well as his prioritizing the content rather than the form of the text – would likewise set the tone for future Western translations of the Qur'ān. Like Robert, future translators would adopt prescribed polemical roles in order to portray Islam in a negative light, while simultaneously paying careful attention to the text under scrutiny with the tools available (Burman 2007, p. 3). Since the word 'Qur'ān' connoted controversy in many circles, especially in light of increasing conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims, translators sometimes felt compelled to sharpen their attacks on Muhammad and the Qur'ān lest they be mistaken for Muslim sympathizers, often using prefaces and illustrations as ways of compromising with the authorities and protecting themselves (Hamilton 2008).

Robert's translation was printed in 1543 in revised form by Theodor Bibliander, Zwingli's successor in the Chair of Theology at Basle, as part of a three-volume reference work under the title *Machumetis Sarracenorum principis vita ac doctrina omnis* . . . (*The Life and Teachings of Machumet, Prince of the Saracens*). There were other attempts at translating the Qur'ān during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, such as the now lost 'translation' by Juan de Segovia (1454–1456), which was an accessory to an older Castilian translation, as well as Johannes Terrolensis's translation commissioned by Egidio da Viterbo (1518), which only survives in manuscript form. Once again, Bibliander's project was driven by controversy: Bibliander claimed that his motive was to show where real heresy lay in the Catholic–Protestant polemic. The work is prefaced by Luther, together with a letter by Philip Melanchthon and an apology by Bibliander – a necessity in view of the authorities' opposition to its publication. In the apology, Bibliander argues that although the Qur'ān contained much that was heretical, it should not be ignored. Other parts of the Cluniac corpus are included, as well as countless refutations of Muslim doctrine by various hands. Despite its questionable quality, the significance of this publication lies in the fact that it is the first published translation of the Qur'ān, as well as the fact the Qur'ān has now becomes an integral part of polemics within Christianity, as opposed to being used to address Christian–Muslim polemic. Four years later, Andrea Arrivabene, retranslated Bibliander's Latin Qur'ān into Italian (while claiming to have produced a new translation from the Arabic text), and in 1616 Salomon Schweigger retranslated Arrivabene's retranslation from Italian into German under the title, *Der Türken Alkoran*, thereby indicating the extent to which 'Muslim' and 'Turk' were now synonymous (as opposed to the previously more current, 'Saracen'), and the reality of the Ottoman military threat in Central Europe. In 1641, an anonymous Dutch translator retranslated Schweigger's retranslation of Arrivabene's retranslation of Bibliander's version of Robert of Ketton's translation of the Qur'ān, producing a text five times removed from the Arabic original.

As of the middle of the seventeenth century, then, no Western reader has what can properly be called a complete published translation of the canonical codex of the Qur'ān – there were only paraphrases with interpolated exegeses, revised paraphrases and retranslations increasingly distant from the Arabic text along with the occasional partial translation. All of this would change in 1647, with the publication of André Du Ryer's *Alcoran de Mahomet*. Du Ryer had a long and varied career as a diplomat in the Middle East, with appointments in Alexandria, Cairo and Istanbul. Although far more attentive than his predecessors to the form and literary qualities of the Qur'ān, Du Ryer nevertheless rendered the Arabic text into the elegant French that would be deemed acceptable for a seventeenth-century public without being overly concerned with an accurate rendition of the content (Hamilton & Richard 2004, pp. 101–103).

Although it contains several serious mistakes, Du Ryer's is a vast improvement on what had gone before, as witness his openly acknowledged reliance on well-established exegeses, despite the fact that he occasionally gets the attribution wrong (Hamilton & Richard 2004, pp. 96–101). Instead of providing the reader with voluminous compendia aimed at refuting the Qur'ān, Du Ryer contents himself with a six-page summary of 'la religion des Turcs', openly derogatory in tone but arguably included to camouflage Du Ryer's sympathy with the Muslims (Hamilton & Richard 2004, pp. 93–96). Du Ryer takes the reader away from the mode of translation borne of conflict and crisis, towards a more genuine, if still troubled, intercultural connection.

None of Du Ryer's inaccuracies stopped Alexander Ross from publishing an English retranslation of his *Alcoran* in 1649. Although the translator's identity is unknown, Ross clearly takes pains to display his anti-Muslim credentials (possibly, again, in an attempt to foil any censors' attempts at accusing him of holding too favourable a view of Islam): the reader is promised a text in which 'the great Arabian Impostor now at last after a thousand years, is by the way of France arrived in England, and his Alcoran, or gallimaufry of errors (a Brat as deformed as the Parent, and as full of Heresies, as his scald head was full of scurf) hath learned to speak English.' The Ross Qur'ān would eventually become the first one to be published in the USA (Springfield, MA, 1806). Du Ryer's translation was also retranslated into Dutch and German by Jan Glazemaker (1658 and 1688), and into Russian (with numerous inaccuracies) by Petr Vasilyevic Postnikov (1716) and in a more accurate version by Mikhail Verevkin (1790).

By the end of the seventeenth century, Arabic studies and library collections in the West finally reached a point that enabled a complete translation with a fuller set of annotations. Ludovico Marracci, one of the sharpest minds of the age, published his monumental *Alcorani textus universus* . . . in Padua in 1698. This publication is striking on a number of levels: the reader is met with the fully vocalized Arabic text of the Qur'ān, followed by a detailed translation, followed by an impressive set of

scholarly notes adducing multiple Arabic sources, exegetical and historical, usually quoted in the original and then translated into Latin. Unfortunately, the volume of all this valuable information is matched, nay dwarfed, by the painstaking 'refutation' that Marracci adds to every translated passage. That the refutation was the point of Marracci's lifelong project is evinced by his publication of a four-part *Prodromus ad refutatio alcorani* (*A Prologue to the Refutation of the Qur'ān*) in 1691, which *Prodromus* was then republished alongside the translation of 1698. Despite the open hostility of Marracci's tone (in the conclusion he congratulates himself on having 'killed Muhammad with his own sword'), and the often too literal quality of the translation, the sheer wealth of information contained therein makes it a good candidate for the title of the first encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān.

Marracci's massive effort was clearly inscribed within the strategy of the Catholic reformation, undertaken with the aim of restoring the intellectual and theological glory that was the Church of Rome before the reformation. Ironically, another translation would shortly come along that was spurred and supported by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), which, although initially founded with the aim of opposing what was seen as the moral laxity of the early eighteenth century, soon turned into an anti-Catholic platform. (Haydon 1993) In 1734, with the support of the SPCK, George Sale produced what many consider to be the finest early modern translation of the Qur'ān in the English language. Although he did not reproduce the Arabic text, Sale stopped at nothing to produce a balanced and informative rendition of the Qur'ān, so much so that the few anti-Muslim statements that one runs across in his paratexts come across as being perfunctory and insincere. The translation, which is copiously annotated (there are footnotes to the footnotes on every page), is preceded by a long 'Preliminary Discourse' (the title is a riposte to Marracci's *Prodromus*) in which Sale presents the history and geography of seventh-century Arabia, the rise of Islam, the history of the revelation and collection of the Qur'ān, as well as a cursory map of the doctrines and schools of thought of Islamic theology. Sale clearly acknowledges his debt to the previous generation of Orientalists – Marracci and Pocock in particular – but the result of his research and skill as a translator are unparalleled.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, all three translations would be retranslated in whole or in part, with Sale enjoying the widest diffusion of all. Of the three translations of the early modern period, Sale and Du Ryer were the ones that enjoyed the widest readership. By the mid-eighteenth century hybrid editions that combined a French translation of Sale's 'Preliminary Discourse' with the text of Du Ryer's translation of the Qur'ān were common in France. Sale's translation was retranslated into German by Theodor Arnold (1764) – a mere 8 years before David Megerlin's translation of the Qur'ān from Arabic into German (1772) – as well as Russian by Alexei Vasilevich Kolmakov (1792) and Hungarian by Istvan Szokoly (1822). The Arnold and Megerlin translations had a

significant impact on the thinking of Goethe, who found fault with both of them for being insufficiently literary and poetic. This particular way of thinking about the Qur'ān would eventually lead to a genealogy of translations that attempted to live up to its literary qualities, such as the translations from Arabic into German by Boysen (1773), by the German Orientalist and poet Friedrich Rückert in a translation published posthumously and by Rudi Paret (see below). The Marracci translation did not circulate as widely, probably because its cost and size made it difficult to obtain, though its continued use within the Orientalist community well into the nineteenth century attests to its quality.

In 1783, there appeared a second French translation, ostensibly based on the Arabic, by Claude Savary. Savary claims to have published the text in Mecca, though this seems to be part of a consistent pattern of exaggeration and decoration that one also finds in his translation. What the Savary translation lacks in critical and historical apparatus it makes up in notes devoted to local colour, yielding to an exoticizing aesthetic situated between rococo and romanticism. Its inaccuracies indicate that it is more of a retranslation of Marracci's text rather than a straight translation from the Arabic, though none of this has prevented its repeated republication during the twentieth century.

During the nineteenth century, two key shifts affected the production and circulation of the translation of the Qur'ān in the West. The imperialist project led to a move away from the axis joining scholarship and theology towards the axis joining scholarship and conquest. Thus, Albin de Biberstein Kazimirski's excellent French translation of the Qur'ān was first published in 1840 as part of a massive tome entitled, *Les Livres sacrés de l'orient* edited by a sinologist, Guillaume Pauthier, whose preface argues that a better understanding of the Qur'ān would lead to better control over, or at least a better experience in, France's colonies. It bears pointing out, however, that Kazimirski's sympathies on the matter are more difficult to locate, and that Pauthier adds to the political ambiguity by adding a French translation of Sale's 'Preliminary Discourse' to the volume. The Kazimirski translation also saw separate publication in 1840 as well as several revisions and corrections over the course of the decade, with the final edition going through multiple reprints well into the twentieth century and major specialists attesting to its quality (Arkoun, Rodinson) with each reprinting.

The Kazimirski translation is also marked by a certain paucity of notes as compared with its eighteenth-century predecessors, perhaps reflecting a further division of the field of Orientalism: it is now assumed that the reader will refer to outside sources (such as Kazimirski's fine French–Arabic dictionary) as he or she sees fit, rather than expecting the whole to be contained within one volume. With the philological and critical research of Weil, Flügel and Nöldeke, Qur'ānic studies took a giant step forward. Thus, translations of the Qur'ān with the Suras arranged in chronological order start to appear in 1861, when John M. Rodwell published his

English translation (albeit in a chronological order that differed from those proposed by Weil and Nöldeke). The chronological trend would eventually peak with the English translation of Richard Bell, first published in 1937–1939, though the full scholarly apparatus that went with his work would not be published until some 40 years after his death in 1991. Bell's translation rearranges individual verses and parts of verses, often depicting his chronological theories through the arrangement of the text on the page. Régis Blachère's French translation (1947–1949) of the Qur'ān combines the Qur'ān and its scholarly apparatus: the detailed and annotated translation presents the Suras in the order suggested by Nöldeke with various thematic subheadings, taking variant readings into account and fully engaging with the genetic history of the text of the Qur'ān, itself a major constituent of Blachère's introduction. A second edition of Blachère's translation, without the introduction and with the text arranged in traditional order, appeared in 1957. The last of the century's great historicist-philological translations was produced by Rudi Paret in 1962, followed by a commentary and concordance in 1971. Paret aimed at reproducing the meaning that the Qur'ān had at the time when it was first heard, and, in a gesture that seems to have been inspired by Marracci though used for a diametrically opposed end, sought to understand the Qur'ān through the Qur'ān itself. Part of the process involved a certain degree of scepticism towards exegetical texts composed long after the death of the Prophet and the compilation of the Qur'ān. Needless to say, Paret's text is fascinating but makes for difficult reading, even after the changes that he introduced in 1982.

More translations in the West tackle the reality of the years of conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims head-on, with ethical and political criteria occasionally prevailing over linguistic ones, and the pendulum swinging back to the evaluation of relations between Muslim and non-Muslim rather than relations between Christians as had been the case in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, whose monumental translation into English includes extensive notes and a commentary in verse, refers in his introduction to the extensive 'amount of mischief done by these versions of non-Muslim and anti-Muslim writers [i.e. Western translators from Robert of Ketton to E. H. Palmer] has led Muslim writers to venture into the field of English translation' (Yusuf 'Ali 1934, p. xv). Nevertheless, Yusuf 'Ali's translation is remarkable for its broad-minded approach to translation, giving the reader a good idea of the multiple levels of meaning in play at any one textual moment. Yusuf 'Ali draws on a number of commentaries from across the cultural spectrum, making a point of listing Nöldeke-Schwally's *Geschichte des Qorāns* alongside several dictionaries, including those of Lane and Penrice, in addition to the standard exegeses. Muhammad Abdel Haleem's introduction to his important English translation (2004) contains a review of his predecessors that calls attention to the extent to which various translations 'respect' for the

language of the Qur'ān and the prophet of Islam (Abdel Haleem 2004, pp. xxvii–xxviii).

A similar dynamic obtains in continental Europe. In 1972, two French translations of the Qur'ān were published, both by what might be called sympathetic translators: Sheikh Si Hamza Boubakeur and Jean Grosjean. The former is a massive translation with a very erudite commentary based on both traditional Muslim and Western sources. In his preface, Boubakeur explains that his intention was to protect Islam and the Qur'ān from the 'calumnies' of their detractors (Boubakeur 1995, p. 12). The Grosjean translation was published in a deluxe edition with a preface by Jacques Berque (who would himself translate the Qur'ān in 1990) in which he emphasizes the Qur'ān as the privileged point of entry into the civilization of the Arabs (Le Coran 1972, p. 9). In both cases, the production of the text is clearly in dialogue with France's large Muslim population, a direct result of the policies of imperialism and decolonization of the past two centuries. Like Grosjean, Denise Masson's excellent French translation (1967) repeatedly draws attention to the similarities between the Qur'ān and the Bible with a view to implementing the ethos of appreciating the Other formulated by Louis Massignon.

Of the many responses and reactions to Western imperialism and missionary activity in South Asia, the Ahmadiyya movement has had a significant impact on the translation of the Qur'ān. The movement's strong commitment to literacy among its own members and proselytization abroad has given rise to a number of translations of the Qur'ān into Western languages. These are marked by the incorporation of pronounced rationalizing and de-metaphorizing tendencies, leading to some unusual interpretations. The introduction to Muhammad Zafrulla Khan's 1971 translation takes pains to explain that the *jinn* are, in fact, human beings 'who for any reason . . . would have a tendency to regard themselves as superior to and withdraw themselves from the society and companionship of their less-favoured fellows' (Khan 1971, p. 16). Similarly, *ad* Q27:19, Khan follows the earlier Ahmadiyya translator Maulvi Muhammad 'Ali in translating *wādī-l-naml* as 'the Valley of Al-Naml', and *namlah* as 'a woman of the tribe of the Naml' rather than 'Valley of the Ants' and 'an ant', respectively. He also reads *hudhud* (Q27:21) as the proper name of a person named Hudhud rather than a common noun meaning 'hoopoe' or 'lapwing'. In this translation, the details of Solomon's miraculous ability to communicate with birds and animals are seriously depleted.

The question of Imamī (Twelver Shī'ī) translations of the Qur'ān is complicated by the paradoxical Shī'ī position of endorsing the canonical codex of the Qur'ān while simultaneously adhering to the belief that this codex has been corrupted. Although it would be difficult to speak of a 'Shī'ī' translation of the Qur'ān, many recent translations have incorporated elements of Shī'ī exegesis into the notes and commentary. Thus, in the translation of SV Mir Ahmad Ali (1964), which was published with a

commentary by Ayatullah Mirza Mahdi Pooya, we find explicit and lengthy documentation *ad* Q33:33 that the phrase *ahl al-bayt* ('people of the house' or 'members of the family') refers specifically to five members of the family of the prophet, namely Muhammad himself, his daughter Fātima, 'Alī, and their children Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. This reading of this particular verse is also found in Yusuf 'Alī, *ad loc.* Similarly *ad* Q24:35, we read that the phrase *nūr 'alā nūr* ('light upon light') is to be interpreted as Muhammad and Ahl al-Bayt. *Ad* Q36:12, we are told that the phrase *imām mubīn* ('clear writing' or 'a clear book') actually refers to 'Alī, the first imām. Other annotations explicate the link between the Qur'ān and the imamate, 'Alī's status as Muhammad's successor and various aspects of Shī'ī law.

Recent advances in computing power led Rashad Khalifa to propose a new translation of the Qur'ān (1982) and a new foundation of Islam (renamed 'Submission'). Khalifa saw in the mathematical patterns of the Qur'ān proof of its divine provenance and wrote extensively about the recurrence of various patterns in the text, all based on the number 19. One of the more unusual conclusions reached by Khalifa is that the two verses Q9:128–129 are false and should therefore be removed from the codex (Khalifa 2003).

Among the more politically engaged translations, Laleh Bakhtiar's 2007 English translation, *The Sublime Quran*, deserves special mention. Bakhtiar tackles one of the most controversial verses in the Qur'ān – *wūḍribuhunna* (Q4:34, meaning 'hit them' or 'smack them'), often read as a verse permitting violence against women. Bakhtiar translates this verse to mean 'stay away from them', referring to the separation that should follow marital strife (Bakhtiar 2007, pp. lii–lv) Although this interpretation is not entirely original to Bakhtiar – Abdulhamid Abusulayman made a similar case in 2003 (Abusulayman 2003) – the fact that it is advanced in the context of the translation of the entire Qur'ān from Arabic into English as attracted a great deal of media attention and, inevitably, controversy.

Among the recent English translations that successfully convey the lyrical force and emotional charge, of the Qur'ān, Tarif Khalidi's is outstanding. The deft use of layout, language and learning combine to move the reader in a way that approximates its impact on those who heard the earliest revelations. Khalidi's background as a historian at home in contemporary Anglophone literature makes it likely that this will be a translation of lasting influence.

As of this writing, however, there have been few attempts, if any, of bringing to the Qur'ān something like what the higher criticism brought to the Bible starting in the late nineteenth century. Clearly such a project would require a team of translators rather than, as has been the case hitherto, one translator working in splendid isolation over several years. All hope is not lost, however: as repeated calls for such work are issued, they are bound to be heeded sooner or later (Gilliot 1992).

Short Biography

Ziad Elmarsafy's research focuses on the concept of identity and the relationship between Europe and the Muslim world, as well as modern Arabic literature and the appropriation of religion in literary and cultural discourses of the twentieth century. He has published *The Histrionic Sensibility: Theatricality and Identity from Corneille to Rousseau* (2001), *Freedom, Slavery and Absolutism: Corneille, Pascal, Racine* (2003) and *The Enlightenment Qur'an: The Politics of Translation and the Construction of Islam* (2009). Before coming to the University of York, he taught at the University of California, Riverside, Wellesley College and New York University. He holds a BA in Physics from Cornell University and a PhD in French from Emory University.

Note

* Correspondence address: Ziad Elmarsafy, Department of English and Related Literature, University of York, Heslington, York YO10 5DD, UK. E-mail: ziad12@gmail.com.

¹ For most of my research, I have relied on Hartmut Bobzin's article, 'Translations of the Qur'an' in the *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, a model of clarity and coverage with a very rich bibliography, as well as the article and extensive bibliography in by Alford T. Welch et al., 'Al-Kur'an' in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, especially the useful entry by Rudi Paret under the subheading, 'Translations of the Qur'an.' Shereen Khairallah's dissertation, 'Arabic Studies in Seventeenth-Century England,' is an indispensable work on early orientalism.

NB: The following bibliography lists primarily those works referred to in the article, with few additions. Full lists of translations of the Qur'an are found in the aforementioned entries in the *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* and the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Reference to these two resources is to the online version at www.brillonline.nl, accessed various dates September 2007 to September 2008.

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